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ABSTRACT

Francis Christensen's Rhetoric Program stresses narrative-descriptive and expository writing, and offers a guide for the structure of the paragraph. In this approach, students develop their composition skills by writing sentences similar to model sentences that Christensen has extracted from the works of successful writers. The basic model is the cumulative sentence, which contains a short base or main clause with one or more "free" modifiers in the final position. From practice with this model, students learn to employ four principles: adding free modifiers, directing the movement of modification, exploring levels of generality, and improving the texture of writing with proper modification. (RL)

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# USING CHRISTENSEN'S GENERATIVE RHETORIC IN REMEDIAL ENGLISH

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## USING CHRISTENSEN'S GENERATIVE RHETORIC IN REMEDIAL ENGLISH

The English Department of Midlands Technical College in Columbia, South Carolina, like other departments across the country, faces a continuing dilemma over the teaching of freshman English. With seven years experience in teaching composition in two very different institutions, one a small, rural two-year junior college in Alabama, the other a large two-year technical-community college in Columbia, South Carolina, I ask, probably like most other teachers of freshman English, "Where have I gone wrong?" In contemplating this question, I realize that my dilemna is not unique. There is a mounting concern in many two- and four-year English departments over the decline in college students' writing skills, a decline which supposedly has taken place only in recent years. But, why the decline? And, what can I do about it?

First of all, I agree with William Lutz, Director of Freshman English at Rutgers University, that one reason for this sharp decline is high school teachers have not taught students to write.[1] It is true that colleges in the past have prepared high school teachers in literature; these high school teachers, in many cases, have no knowledge in the teaching of writing. Secondly, there is the old problem of "work load." High school teachers with 150 to 200 students simply can not teach writing because one can only do so much. In many high schools that I have observed, the high school English teacher is a glorified "babysitter," and in some cases, he is not even "glorified." High schools continue to put more emphasis on their athletic programs than they do on academics (and there is certainly nothing wrong with emphasis on physical fitness). It is much more important for Johnny to make a touchdown in the last two minutes of the weekly Friday night football game than it is for him to know how to organize and express himself in a short composition to his teacher and fellow classmates. Lutz states emphatically that we live in a society that does not value good writing. I agree with this statement.

We need to teach students that they need to write for their own benefit, as well as the benefit of their children and grandchildren. As a concerned college English instructor, I have been forced not only to worry, think about, and study about this dilemma, but also to act--to do something about this disastrous inability to write which my students have.

As I have said before, if today's English teacher in the technical-community college desires real life, real substance in student writing, then he must provide workable stimuli widely different from the traditional rules that secondary and some post-secondary teachers for so long have relied on. He must present real stimuli for thinking, stimuli to which the student can relate. He must possess truthful confidence in the student's ability to formulate an argument, i.e. the recognition by the teacher that there are alternative ways to express ideas. Moreover, he must possess the power to critize fruitfully the student's efforts. One can teach a student some of the many problems involved in writing, and on occasion can instruct him how <u>not</u> to write; however, only the student can teach himself to write. This process is arduous for both student and teacher. However, it need not be dehumanizing, depressing, or miserable, anymore than teaching freshman composition or remedial English need be a burden. (Yes, there are some who are too "knowledgeable," "too academic" to teach freshman composition or remedial English.)

Teaching composition in a remedial English setting should not be boring, boring for the teacher or for the student. However, it can be a bore, especially if the instructor gives drills in usage, spelling, and punctuation, with a few simple rules for composition thrown in; remedial students do seem stupid if they are forced to concern themselves with mundane issues. (As for our not being able to teach them to write, that depends on how one defines writing). At Southern Union State Junior College, a small school set in rural Randolph County in eastern Alabama, in the fall of 1971 fifty-five per cent of the incoming freshmen were placed in a remedial English class. However, these students were not only required to take remedial English, but

also were placed im complementary speech and reading classes. These three courses constitute the Developmental Communications Program established in the fall of 1971 because there was such a great need for approximately fifty percent of all incoming freshmen to have some type of background work before they could successfully perform in the regular curriculum provided in this typical Alabama junior college. Indeed it is unfortunate that some high school teachers have not taken accountability more seriously during the past years and that the young, alert college-bound student suffers from their failures.

Previously in my developmental English classes at Southern Union the students were instructed as to how not to write. Using Francis Christensen's Generative Rhetoric Program, I revolutionized the teaching of composition to the culturally deprived and academically disadvantaged students. Those who have worked with Christensen's principles know their merits. And as Michael Grady has pointed out in "On Teaching Christensen Rhetoric," "many teachers either use the Christensen approach in toto or else incorporate large blocks of Generative Rhetoric as an integral part of their classes." However, Grady goes on to point out that there are some others who have only heard briefly of the approach and thus are reluctant to get deep into it.[2] It is to these English teachers that I wish to suggest the Christensen approach for teaching composition.

Christensen's Rhetoric Program stresses narrative-descriptive and expository writing and offers a guide for the structure of the paragraph. Christensen extracted model cumulative sentences from fiction by successful and renouned writers and reprinted these sentences on visuals. The students are asked in THE STUDENT WORKBOOK to write similar ones by modeling their sentence form after those by these renouned authors like Irwin Shaw, Eudora Welty, William Faulkner, etc.

The whole purpose of the Christensen approach, according to Christensen himself, is to develop competence in writing. His instrument to achieve this compe-

tence is the cumulative sentence, a sentence which contains a short base or main clause with one or more "free" modifiers in the final position. Christensen distinguishes between embedded (restrictive) and "free" (nonrestrictive) modifiers by showing that embedded modifiers are attached to the noun head or verb head which they modify and are never set off by commas; a free modifier is detached from the noun head of verb head it modifies and is always set off by commas. He emphasizes John Erskine's statement that the modifier is the single most important element in any sentence and thus builds his four principles from this idea.

Christensen's cumulative sentence then is formed by the addition of at least one free modifier (Principle one); other modifiers can be embedded or there can be additional free modifiers in the initial position, coming before the base clause or in the medial position, splitting the base clause or in the final position, coming after the base clause. Thus, the direction of movement of modification (Principle two) is dependent on the type modification. When a modifier is added---whether to a noun, a verb, or the base clause--it can either be before or within or after what it modifies. There are probably more final modifiers than initial and medial, for as Christensen points out, language is mainly a matter of addition. If a modifier is added before the noun or verb or base clause, the direction of modification is forward; if a modifier is added after either of these, then the direction of modification is backward. For example, look at Saul Bellow's sentence extracted by Christensen to prove this principle:

It was a slaty, windy day with specks of snow sliding through the trees.

"Slaty, windy" has a forward direction of modification where as "with specks of snow sliding through the trees" has a backward direction.

Since a requirement of the cumulative sentence is the free, nonrestrictive modifier in the final position, Christensen's third principle explores levels of generality. The base clause of a sentence can likely be stated in either general, abstract, or plural terms according to Christensen. When free modifiers are added

to the end of this base clause, the forward movement of the sentence stops, and the free modifiers give a backward or reverse direction of movement. Thus the writer backtracks or gives the reader an "instant replay," giving detail to the term--whether it be abstract, general, or plural--in the base clause. For example, let us examine this sentence by John Updike, used by Francis Christensen.

1- He could see everything about the man,

2 - his sly cat's smile,
2 - the peak of hair on the back of his head,
2 - his hemispherical stomach,
2 - his candy-striped t-shirt, and
2 - his crepe-soled shoes.

In this main clause we have the general term EVERYTHING. It is a vague, empty word meaning nothing until the author gave it meaning with the addition of the five free modifiers. Thus, with the addition of the noun phrases after the base clause, the word EVERYTHING takes on meaning. The picture of the man has come into focus.

A similar process takes place when the author expresses himself with a plural term in the short base clause of the cumulative sentence. For example, observe the following sentence:

1. How grateful they had been for the coffee,

2 - she looking up at him,
3 - tremulous
3 - her lips pecking the cup,
2 - he blessing the coffee as it went down her.

With the addition of the final free modifiers, the plural term THEY has been focused upon and reduced to its singular elements.

Thus, the principle of <u>levels of generality</u> is derived from the two principles previously stated, the principle of <u>addition</u> and the principle of <u>direction of movement of modification</u>. Level by level, the picture of the action or the object or the point of the statement grows more definite and precise; thus, the fourth principle, and the last, is that of <u>texture</u>.

As Christensen points out, <u>texture</u> is a descriptive term, one which can be used to describe or evaluate or judge a piece of writing. Most of the writing

of my remedial students during the first few weeks of the quarter has poor texture. The students simply do not add modification to the nouns and verbs or clauses which they construct. Their texture is thin, like the texture of a piece of cheap, threadbare cotton material. The style is plain and bare. If a student adds modification frequently, using both embedded and free modifiers, then the texture of his writing may be said to be dense or rich. Of course, this can be overdone, but not many students that I have taught have made this "error."

I think that the competent teacher of writing should be able to see at this point that the Christensen approach to the teaching of composition is an effective one. The Christensen principles apply equally as well as guides for construction of the sentence, the paragraph, and units beyond the level of the paragraph, up to, and, of course, including the level of the paper as a whole. It seems, then, that Christensen's Generative Rhetoric Program offers in its model writing approach a basic framework, an integrated theory for the teaching of composition. I feel this is the resource the <u>last</u> generation of teachers needed; I hope this is the theoretical framework <u>this</u> generation of teachers will utilize. Christensen's approach works in the classroom. I know; I tried it.

[1]Donald J. Dieterich, "The Decline in Students' Writing Skills: An ERIC/RCS Interview," College English, Vol. 38, No. 5 (January, 1977), 466-472.

[2]Michael Grady, "On Teaching Christensen Rhetoric," English Journal, Vol. 61, No. 6 (September, 1972), 859-873.